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ABSTRACT

This paper chronicles the organizational life of two high schools in the northeastern United States as they responded to the national impetus for change. The study used a methodology employing ethnographic field study methods including field notes, interviews, and artifact collection and analysis. Riverside High pursued a locally initiated change strategy through a new administrative team hired by the school board. Centreville High's participation in Re:Learning, a nationally based reform movement, was catalyzed by a group of veteran teachers who sought to overcome a reluctant building administrator. Both schools created teaching teams and opportunities for active student learning and took decision-making actions through committee structures that involved faculty, parents, and community members. However, within the context of the Criteria for School Restructuring, Centreville accomplished more than did Riverside. Committee work at Centreville was based on Coalition of Essential Schools principles, and Riverside was forced to rely on the limited resources and vision of the school's administrative staff. Participation in the national Re:Learning effort enabled Centreville to more closely achieve the real school change envisioned in the Criteria, whereas the lack of a coherent schoolwide reform blueprint relegated Riverside to fundamentally artificial, structural changes. (Contains 111 references.) (LMI)

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THE POWER OF COALITION:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO SCHOOL REFORM PROJECTS

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On September 28, 1989, then-President George Bush declared to the nation's governors that "the American people are ready for radical reforms" in public schooling, and that "we must not disappoint them." Among the reforms envisioned were

> restructuring schools by moving more authority to the school level, toughening the curriculum, promoting parental and community involvement, and giving teachers responsibility... (Education Week, October 3, 1989).

President Bush's statement indicated an interest in, and concern for America's schools at the national level of politics which was reflected and refracted in local school sites throughout the decade of the 1980's. Beginning with the release of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, school systems throughout the country changed, either by force through revisions of state statutes, or choice via locally initiated efforts. Some schools followed one of the several competing models of school change and reform which arose through the course of the decade.

This paper will briefly chronicle the organizational life of two local schools as they responded to the national impetus for change. One school pursued a locally-initiated change strategy, while the other became involved in a nationally-based reform movement. The key events and people will be analyzed and compared to examine the efficacy of one approach over another. The research upon which this paper is based was presented in a doctoral dissertation at Teachers College, Columbia University in December, 1992.

Such a study is significant because, despite the voluminous literature on federally-sponsored school reform produced over the past decade, relatively few

studies have yet been presented to document the efforts of local schools in implementing reforms articulated, but not funded, by national or federal-level agents. Further, much analytic work on school change strategies remains to be done on the specific variables which influence change in schools, among them the local contextual conditions of communities and school districts, the attributes of change efforts, the effects of local policy choices, and other endogenous variables such as degree of conflict over the change effort (Berman, 1981).

The two schools in the study were selected based on three factors: the presence of a comprehensive reform agenda; the similarity of their reform programs; and accessibility to the researcher. The nature of the study dictated a methodology employing ethnographic field study methods, including extensive field notes, interviews, and artifact collection and analysis which extended over a 26 month period. The investigation focused on the course of the reform programs--their initiation and implementation--and the organizational influences which either impeded or enhanced the reform process.

It should be here noted that the author of the study occupied a key administrative position in each school during various phases of the research project, thus the study is bounded by the constraints of partcipant observation. Further, although this is a multi-site study, the generalizability of its conclusions is still limited.

The reforms undertaken within the two study schools attempted to address three concerns: the growing cry for teacher empowerment--defined here as partici-

pation and responsibility for decision making within the school building; the need to increase student achievement; and the introduction of a plan for educational technology. The 'compromises'--organizational, political, and personal--which each school and its members adopted along the way constituted the reality of their experiences of change and reform.

The schools selected for the study will be referred to as Riverside High School and Centreville Area High School. Riverside High School is a suburban high school in the northeastern part of the United States, located approximately 15 miles from a major city. Centreville Area High, by contrast, is located in a rural community 200 miles west of Riverside, but is situated just 10 miles from a major university. The Riverside community is primarily residential/professional, with sixty per cent of Riverside's students attending four-year colleges upon graduation. Centreville is a mixed community socioeconomically, with fifty per cent of its graduates enrolling in four-year colleges. Both communities are predominantly caucasian.

The Riverside School District's total student population numbers approximately 2250, with 600 students enrolled in the high school, grades 9-12. Centreville Area's total student population is approximately 2800; 800 students attend the high school, also in grades 9-12.

The two study schools exhibit both similarities and differences. The differences are related to external variables; Riverside is suburban and relatively affluent, while Centreville is rural and relatively poor. The similarities, however, reflect a congruence between the reform programs undertaken by the two schools.

Of particular interest to this study is the role which participation in a nationally-based reform effort played in the change effort at one of the study schools. Centreville Area High School is a participant in the Re:Learning initiative, while Riverside pursued its change strategy independently and through local initiative. The key question, did participation in a nationally-based reform initiative prove helpful in pursuing a reform agenda, in terms of producing greater 'results' within the reform program, is of interest to both policymakers and practitioners of school reform.

Change is difficult to assess. Lehming and Kane (1981) assert that

> change policies can be analyzed for two basic types of consequences: policy outcomes and consequences referring to the process of change itself. To what extent change results--let alone improvement--is problematical...

Further, reform is more difficult and challenging, and is fraught with ambiguities (Mann, 1977; Fullan, 1982). This study defines school reform as an epistemological event; an attitudinal transformation among those who work in schools such that adults in schools see themselves as responsible for both the learning experiences and the learning outcomes of the students who represent their clientele.

Although strict evaluative comparisons between the two study schools were avoided, a school reform assessment instrument, the "Criteria for School Restructuring," developed at the University of Wisconson-Madison, was utilized as an analytical template for purposes of discussion. The 'Criteria' addresses the areas of school life involving student experiences, the professional life of teachers,

management and leadership, and coordination of community resources.

The initiation phases of the school change processes at each study school were dissimilar. Riverside's change effort was propelled by a new administrative team who was hired by the school board, whereas Centreville's process was catalyzed by a group of veteran teachers who sought to overcome a reluctant building administrator. A further brief summary of the major changes which occurred at each school during the period of the study will indicate both the diversity and the divergence of paths which occur during school change, despite a professed similarity in reform goals.

At Riverside, the new administrative team attempted to craft a comprehensive change strategy which would fundamentally alter both the 'look' and substance of a student's experience at that school. An exhaustive physical plant renovation project coincided with changes in the student attendance policy, which was intended to induce student attendance and punctuality, a longstanding 'problem' at the school. A teaming structure was created by administrative fiat which paired English and social studies teachers in ninth and tenth grade, and additional periods of English instruction--for writing and language arts--were added to the schedule. Mandatory remedial mathematics and science laboratory periods were also added. Of potentially greatest long-term import, an educational technology plan, involving the introduction of a building-wide local area network, a computer-assisted instruction laboratory and development of computer-managed instruction modules, was developed.

All of these 'goals' were pursued via teacher committees. A provision of the negotiated teacher contract called for a 'site-based' decision making body. Prior to the initiation of the reform plan, this body had served as a clearinghouse for teacher complaints, which routinely involved such issues as lack of heat in various classrooms and other mundane matters. Under the reform plan, this group was, again via administrative planning, targeted to be the platform through which the reform agenda would be introduced to the faculty.

Other committees and ad hoc groups, such as department coordinators, team leaders and teachers and the child study team, grappled with various elements of the reform plan. The curriculum implications of teaming and the technology plan were obviously of great import, and the issues provided the grist for discussion at regularly scheduled meetings. Further, a futuring committee and a technology committee were formed to engage with the more long-term implications of a school with a technology-rich learning environment.

At Centreville, a group of three teachers who had participated in state-level informational meetings concerning the Re:Learning initiative spearheaded the drive for change at that school. These individuals led both the organizing and the implementation effort; they also constituted the staff who actually altered their teaching and classroom practices to conform to the stated goals of the reform effort.

Some elements of the Centreville reform plan mirrored those attempted at Riverside. Centreville's 'reform team' of teachers developed and implemented ninth and tenth grade teaching teams which involved the core academic subjects

of English, social studies, mathematics and science. A school-wide advisory program was implemented, as was a 12th-grade interdisciplinary humanities course based upon the Coalition of Essential Schools principles of 'student-as-worker' and exhibition of mastery. Eventually, the master schedule was modified to provide for 78-minute instructional periods two days per week. A service learning program for 12th grade students was also developed. The later stages of the plan involved a significantly greater percentage of the teaching staff, who generated the ideas for the program changes.

Both Riverside and Centreville responded to the growing movement for interdisciplinary curricula via the creation of teaching teams. Further, both attempted to create opportunities for active student learning, at Riverside through the creation of a technology-rich learning environment and at Centreville through advisories, the humanities class and service learning experiences.

Implementation at both school sites proceeded via committee structures which ostensibly provided for wide faculty involvement. Riverside's change process, however, proceeded from a 'blueprint' which was initially planned and promulgated by the school's administrative staff. Centreville's change effort evolved as a result of ongoing dialogue among faculty, and eventually parents and other community members who were invited to serve on committees.

This insistence upon ongoing faculty dialogue was a direct result of Centreville's participation in the Re:Learning initiative. A member of Centreville's faculty was appointed to a state-wide Re:Learning steering committee, and large

numbers of the school's faculty participated in workshops and seminars offered through Re:Learning channels or the Coalition of Essential Schools. This emphasis upon 'involvement in the change process' was absent at Riverside for political reasons; its presence in Centreville must be attributed, at least in part, to involvement in Re:Learning.

Some similarity exists among the roles played by the key agents who participated in the reform processes at both study schools: the school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents and students.

Public, vocal support by each school board was identified as critical to sustaining support for the reform plans during the initiation phases at both schools. The purposes for such support differed, however. In Riverside's case, a public perception that the school had 'declined' relative to other high schools in neighboring school districts fostered support for the administrators' reform plan. In Centreville, by contrast, positive participation in the new programs by the children of board members confirmed their support for the change process.

The roles played by the superintendents of each school district were also divergent. At Riverside, the superintendent was essentially informed, but uninvolved the change process, whereas Centreville's superintendent played an active role, both participating in and publicly supporting involvement in the Re:Learning effort.

The principals played a pivotal role in the reform process at each school, yet in dissimilar ways. While the installation of a reform-oriented management team

was an explicit goal of the school board at Riverside, who then entrusted creation of the plan to that management team, the principal at Centreville did not initiate, nor did he enthusiastically support, the school's involvement in the Re:Learning effort. Ultimately he withdrew from the reform process and 'left the playing field' to accept a position elsewhere.

The Criteria for School Restructuring template does not explicitly address either the role of school boards or the roles of the superintendent and principal. The category of leadership, management and governance of the Criteria, however, advocates a paradigm involving the school exercising control over budget, staffing and curriculum; division of the school into schools-within-schools or houses; governance by a council in which teachers and/or parents have some control over budget, staffing and curriculum; and program decisions based on systematic analysis of student performance data.

Both schools' change programs addressed some elements of the above Criteria. While neither school exercised authority over its budget, Riverside did develop a version of shared decision making through the union council. Further, an important issue which motivated the reform program at Riverside was a decline in student test scores during the 1980's. Had this decline not occurred, the changes which were attempted would likely have been less ambitious.

Centreville's Re:Learning school steering committee enjoyed complete autonomy over both program development for the reform initiative and for the modest grant monies extended by the state department of education for participating

in the Re:Learning effort ($25000.00 during school years 1990-92). This autonomy was limited, however, to proposals for the instructional program; the committee exercised little discretion over building management issues, and fought with the principal over the building schedule until that principal left to pursue another opportunity in a neighboring school district. Neither school generated fundamental changes in teacher-administrator roles and relationships, nor did either school develop a working school-community council which exercised discretion and authority over curriculum, budget and staffing.

Despite the structural changes which occurred at Riverside, including a new management team, teacher committees, teaching teams and the technology laboratories, actual reform proved elusive. Teachers never bought into the administration's plan. The technology plan was seriously compromised by a budget crisis which gripped the district, and true collegiality through shared decision making with teachers did not conform to a political/administrative imperative to 'make the schools better' within a short time frame.

At Centreville, a lack of support by the principal jeopardized the reform effort during the initiation phase. The primary task for the new principal upon his arrival was to both extend needed support to the reform partisans while mending fences with those who opposed the initiative.

From the perspective of site-based management, Centreville's teaching staff experienced measures of leadership and autonomy which Riverside's staff did not approach. In Riverside's experience, the teachers were simply an important vehicle

through which reform might be carried out. Responsibility for generating both the ideas and the processes rested with the administrative staff. In Centreville, the teachers themselves generated the ideas and the means for carrying them out. The price, however, was a much sharper division among the faculty with respect to the reforms, as some teachers came to be perceived as powerful and 'favored' while others feared their programs had fallen into disfavor with central office and thus were in jeopardy of losing their jobs.

Under the rubric of professional life of teachers, the Criteria for School Restructuring addresses such issues as teachers functioning in extended roles involving advising and mentoring; staff members designing staff development activities based on local needs assessment; collegial planning, curriculum development and peer observation during the school day; team teaching; and flexible scheduling patterns. Within these parameters, Centreville High piloted an advisory program and adopted a 78-minute period schedule, while both Riverside and Centreville provided time during the school day for team planning, curriculum development and team teaching. A flexible tutorial period at Centreville and the English laboratory period at Riverside were designed to provide more individualized instructional time for students. Thus each school made palpable changes regarding the use of time within teachers' schedules.

At both schools, parents' and students' involvement in the reform process was limited to committee participation. While their input was solicited, neither of these groups initiated major changes at either school, as the Criteria for School

Restructuring's particular emphasis upon parent involvement remained essentially a non-issue at both schools.

Student experiences figure prominently in the Criteria for School Restructuring, including such issues as distribution of learning time among whole-class instruction, small group work and individual study; heterogeneous grouping; learning and assessment tasks emphasizing student production of knowledge; integration of academic disciplines; flexible scheduling; and use of computer technology to assist student learning.

Within this framework, Centreville High developed more attributes of a 'reformed' school than did Riverside High. Students engaged in more extensive cooperative learning activities and instruction in the humanities course was specifically designed to exclude large-group lectures, emphasizing instead small heterogeneous groupings. The effort to develop student exhibitions and to integrate disciplines through the academic team was also explicit. By contrast, Riverside made strides in the area of electronic instructional technology, including the new local area network which derived from the new library constructed during the renovations at the school. English and social studies instruction was integrated on the ninth and tenth grade teams at Riverside, and a science advisory committee developed, but did not implement, an interdisciplinary 12th grade science experience emphasizing specific learning outcomes.

Within the context of the Criteria for School Restructuring, Centreville accomplished more than did Riverside. As a consequence, can a benefit be argued

for participation in the Re:Learning effort, and ultimately for Centreville, membership in the Coalition of Essential Schools? This study would assert such a positive benefit. Centreville's participation in the national Coalition effort provided a cohesiveness of vision via the Nine Common Principles and financial and staff development resources via the state Re:Learning office. All of the work undertaken by the committees at Centreville proceeded from the intellectual underpinnings of the Coalition's nine principles, while Riverside's change effort, though ambitious, was forced to rely on the limited resources and vision of the school's administrative staff.

The reality of school reform--with all its attendant compromises--is articulated by Muncey and McQuillan (1991),

> ...an effort at major restructuring, like the Coalition, can be so compromised in practice that it becomes a piece of the school structure that it was intended to change rather than a 'force' for change school-wide... our evidence suggests that while many reform efforts are experiencing some success at becoming another specialty shop within the school, they have found it difficult to seriously challenge the school's current structure or practices more broadly.

Theodore Sizer's (1992) assertion that "the pieces of the school reform puzzle are known; they are few, and they interconnect..." proved difficult and in some cases elusive for those involved in the changes at Riverside and Centreville Area High Schools. For those attempting to address essential questions concerning student knowledge and demonstrations of understanding; equity; political, administrative and community contexts which support student learning; and the distinctive concerns of individual students, their families and their communities, some

issues are clear. Political, financial and administrative support are crucial for the success of a reform enterprise. Further, the elements articulated in the Criteria for School Restructuring provide a useful guide in developing the parameters and goals of a change initiative. Participation in the national Re:Learning effort enabled Centreville to more closely achieve the real school change envisioned in the Criteria, whereas the lack of a coherent school-wide reform blueprint relegated Riverside to fundamentally artificial, structural changes.

Life goes on for the students and faculties of Riverside and Centreville Highs. Their experiences have been altered as a result of reform. Whether they have been better prepared for life remains an open question.

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